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THE NEW IRELAND.—VIII.

THE ECONOMIC REVIVAL

BY SYDNEY BROOKS

I DWELT in my last article on the valiant efforts that are being made to reorganize Irish agriculture on a co-operative basis. They are far from standing alone. Within the last twelve years there has been an unprecedented concentration of Irish thought, both private and official, upon problems of constructive economics. It will be convenient as well as accurate to date this new development from the summoning in 1895 of the Recess Committee. The General Election of that year had resulted in a smashing defeat for the Liberals. The feelings that had been aroused by Mr. Gladstone's Home Rule Bill of 1893 died down when it was seen that, for purposes of practical politics, Home Rule was again indefinitely postponed. Sir Horace Plunkett seized upon the momentary calm to formulate and submit to his countrymen "a proposal affecting the general welfare of Ireland." The proposal was very simple; it was only the circumstance that it was put forward in Ireland and by an Irishman that made it so momentous. Sir Horace suggested that the time had come when Unionists, without abating one jot of their Unionism, and Nationalists, without abating one jot of their Nationalism, might meet and confer upon non-partisan schemes for the material and social betterment of their common country. Economic legislation, though sorely needed by Ireland, was hopelessly unattainable unless it could be removed from the region of controversy. All parties and all creeds were at one in desiring the welfare of Ireland. They might differ on the constitutional issue, but why should that prevent them from co-operating in projects of immediate and tangible utility, projects that could be furthered with-

out the smallest compromise of political faith? It gives the measure of Ireland's enslavement to the curse of contention that few were sanguine enough to believe that the Committee suggested by Sir Horace Plunkett could be got together. For a time the pessimists seemed on the way to be justified. Mr. Justin McCarthy, at that time the leader of the largest section of the Nationalist Party, declined to take part in any organization that put material improvement above politics. Colonel Saunderson, the dashing leader of the Irish Unionists, refused point-blank to sit on any Committee with Mr. John Redmond. Mr. Redmond himself, however, speaking for his little band of "Independents"—all that was left of the disciplined host that had once followed Parnell through thick and thin—announced his readiness to co-operate with Sir Horace Plunkett. Among the people generally the proposal met with a swift and hearty success. The Committee was formed; meeting when Parliament was not sitting, it became known as the Recess Committee; and among its members were to be found representatives, and in nearly all cases the best representatives, of every interest, class, industry, creed and party in Ireland. Orangemen and Jesuits, Unionists and Nationalists, the magnates of the industrial North, the leaders of the agricultural South and West, sat side by side in absolute harmony, and after months of exhaustive inquiry in Ireland and abroad presented a unanimous Report. Such a spectacle was unique in Irish history. For the first time practicality triumphed over bigotry and partisanship. For the first time the politicians and the men of business met and fraternized on a common platform. For the first time an economic object secured the united support of the two forces that hitherto, to the immense disadvantage of the country, had been kept apart—the force of industrial leadership on the one hand and of political leadership on the other.

The aim of the Recess Committee was to ascertain the means by which the Government could best promote the development of Ireland's agricultural and industrial resources. The substance of its recommendations was that a new Government Department, to be called the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, should be created, should be adequately endowed, and should be charged with the duty of administering State aid to agriculture and industries in Ireland in such a way as to evoke and supplement, but not to supplant, self-help and individual

initiative. These recommendations gathered round them a large and enthusiastic body of public opinion. They were pressed upon the Government by an Ireland that seemed for the moment to have forgotten its internal feuds and to have risen from the morass of politics into the clear air of practical endeavor. The Government found itself confronted by an irresistible case that, for its own part, it was only too anxious to meet. In 1899 the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction became a reality. It was provided at the outset with a capital sum of about \$100,000 and an annual income of slightly over \$800,000 for development purposes. Its powers include the aiding, improving and developing of agriculture in all its branches; horticulture, forestry, home and cottage industries; sea and inland fisheries; the aiding and facilitating of the transit of produce; the provision of technical instruction suitable to the industrial needs of the country; and the organization of a system of education in science and art. Many scattered but co-related Boards and Departments were merged in the new Department and its constitution was expressly framed to enable the Government and the people to work together towards the building up of a more prosperous Ireland. At some risk of dulness I must dwell a little longer on this feature of its administrative framework. The members of the Recess Committee and the founders of the Department were in complete agreement that its utility depended upon the spirit and degree of its co-operation with the people. To insure this co-operation, to make it possible for the Department to labor not only for the people but with them, a constitution was devised which renders it unique among British governing bodies. Attached to the Department is a Council of Agriculture of 102 members, two-thirds of whom are appointed by the County Councils, the remainder being nominated by the Vice-President of the Department. The Council is chosen for three years; it must be convened at least once a year; and its functions are deliberative and advisory. The criticisms, suggestions and recommendations of the Council have proved to be of the greatest value to the officials of the Department. But the Council fulfils another purpose also. Once every three years it resolves itself into an Electoral College, choosing members to represent it on the Agricultural Board and on the Board of Technical Instruction. The Agricultural Board, consisting of twelve members, eight of whom are elected by the

Council, passes upon the expenditure of all moneys from the endowment funds of the Department. Having therefore the ultimate power of the purse, it is able to check, modify and if necessary veto any policy of which it does not approve. The Board of Technical Instruction, with a rather more complex constitution, has precisely the same powers in relation to its special province. It is clear that machinery, so unusual and elaborate as this, can only be worked at all if it is pervaded by the right spirit. It is clear also that, given the right spirit, it presents a singularly acute and inspiriting union of administrative efficiency and popular control. But the Department is a democratic body, not only in its organization, but in its *modus operandi*. The Act creating it empowered the local County, Borough and District Councils to appoint committees, partly elective and partly co-optive, for the purpose of carrying out such of the Department's schemes as are of local and not of general importance; and to participate in these schemes the local authorities must themselves contribute to the cost of financing them. In this way the Department is brought and kept in touch with the needs of each district without losing its centralized efficiency and the principle of local effort and local co-operation is effectively preserved.

Nearly all the administrative Boards in Ireland are not Irish but English, alien institutions framed after the Whitehall model, largely manned by Englishmen and, whether useful or not, symbols to the Irish mind of a foreign and uncongenial rule. But the Department of Agriculture represents not only a concession won by argument and persuasion instead of agitation, but an effort of purely native thought applied to national economics. The people know it to be their very own; their attitude towards it is wholly different from their attitude towards any other administrative establishment in the country; it enters their daily lives and businesses as a friend and not as a stranger; and I think it a most hopeful and significant fact that this, almost the first, application of Irish ideas to the problems of Irish government should have resulted in the creation of a Department that is not only a variation from the normal type, but in range, efficiency and responsiveness to the real needs of the country far surpasses any similar Department in the British Isles. Most of the credit of this achievement must go to Sir Horace Plunkett. He not only conceived the Department, but was its first working head.

and the principles which guided him through its early critical years were the only ones compatible with genuine and lasting improvement. Ireland being a country where the politicians and the masses are alike almost destitute of economic knowledge and where the facile view that the State is responsible for the welfare of the people is most greedily accepted, it asked courage to risk unpopularity by going slow, by refraining from spoon-feeding, by keeping strictly to the fundamental principle of helping the people to help themselves, and by insisting that instruction must take precedence of doles and subsidies. Happily for Ireland, Sir Horace Plunkett possessed this courage. Under his guidance the Department became the one radiating centre in the vast circumference of Irish officialdom of sound economic thought and practice. I cannot attempt even a *précis* of its multitudinous activities. They cover the whole field of agriculture and technical instruction and even though the experimental period cannot yet be regarded as closed—the Department has only been in existence for eight years—it is not too early to say that there is not a branch of agriculture or of technical instruction that is not the better for its existence. The foundations have been well and truly laid; the youngest of the Irish Departments is already the most useful.

It has had to contend with many obstacles. A certain amount of friction between the Department and the local committees was at first inevitable. The idea of State aid following instead of preceding voluntary and individual exertions had to be popularized. Many wild misconceptions as to the means, objects and powers of the Department had to be removed. The unorganized condition of most of the Irish farmers and the backwardness of primary education made the preliminary task of explanation and of forming workable relations with the agriculturists of any given district an arduous and protracted proceeding. Above all, the Nationalist politicians who had at first blessed the Department soon began to curse it, to obstruct its development, and to do what they could to turn the people against it. Their chief, almost their sole, conception of economic policy is a system under which the State by grants and subsidies does everything for the people and the people do nothing for the State except to open their pockets a little wider. When they found that the Department was determined to insist upon local endeavor as a condition of official co-operation and assistance, they frantically assailed

it because in seven years it had not repaired the ravages of seven centuries. Then, again, it was a grievous disappointment to them to find that Sir Horace Plunkett chose his officers with merit and efficiency as his single test and was neither to be cajoled nor coerced into providing soft posts for political hangers-on. Moreover, as I explained in the preceding article, the Department subsidized the co-operative movement to which the publicans and "gombeen-men," by whose favor many of the Nationalist M.P.'s hold their seats, are violently hostile. Sir Horace Plunkett, furthermore, had built up, through the Department and the local elected committees and through the co-operative societies, an organization which was absolutely non-political and which the Nationalist "machine" was desperately anxious to capture. And besides all this he had published a book which Mr. Redmond brazenly described as "full of undisguised contempt for the Irish race," which the priests, and especially those who had not read it, fell instantly foul of, and which was undoubtedly the means of creating a great deal of foolish prejudice against him. Add to the list of these offences that Sir Horace Plunkett is a Protestant and a Unionist and his vulnerability in the *mélée* of Irish public life is easily appreciated.

But the Nationalist opposition to him and to his work fetched a wider compass and was based on more general grounds than any I have as yet indicated. It is one of the most deplorable features of the Nationalists' propaganda that they resent any attempt to promote Irish welfare from within. They consistently act as though the demand for Home Rule were in inverse proportion to Irish prosperity and as though an Ireland that was helped too far along the path of agricultural and industrial progress would grow indifferent to the national question. The only thing, they declare, which can ever restore prosperity to Ireland is Home Rule; and when this fallacy is disproved by the spectacle of Irishmen increasing their well-being by their own efforts, they at once declare that it is the result of a conspiracy to turn the minds of the people from the constitutional issue. This must seem so wildly absurd to the practicality of Americans and to their sense of proportion that I feel bound to justify what I have written by quotations from two of the acknowledged leaders of the Irish Party. Mr. Redmond when he left New York in October, 1904, wrote a letter to the Editor of the "Irish World"

warning Americans against “an insidious attempt” which was “being made in America by officials and agents of the British Government to divert the minds of the friends of Ireland from the National movement under the pretence of promoting an industrial revival in Ireland.” “I myself,” added the leader of the Irish Party, “at one time entertained some belief in the good intentions of Sir Horace Plunkett and his friends, but recent events have entirely undeceived me; and Sir Horace Plunkett’s recent book . . . makes it plain to me that the real object of the movement in question is to undermine the National Party and divert the minds of our people from Home Rule, which is the only thing which can ever lead to a real revival of Irish industries.” Mr. John Dillon, a far more influential man in Ireland than Mr. Redmond, is even more vehement in his antagonism to anything that promises to make Ireland more prosperous and more businesslike. “I have been criticised more than once,” he said in November, 1906, “because I have been hostile to the whole machine which is controlled by Sir Horace Plunkett. Why have I been hostile to it? Because I know from my own knowledge that it is from top to bottom a machine to burst up and destroy the National Party and the National movement. It comes like a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Its agents go among the people as the promoters of industry; but the real object of the whole business is to break up the National Party and to prepare the way for Devolution.” There is nothing to be added by way of comment on these preposterous and deliberate absurdities except to remark that they reflect but too truthfully the common attitude of the Irish Party towards all endeavors on behalf of internal betterment. It has become a fixed habit with the leaders of that Party to denounce all such endeavors as political conspiracies.

For these reasons the Nationalist M.P.’s set themselves to thwart Sir Horace Plunkett and the Department by every means in their power. They hindered but they could not destroy the admirable work he initiated—the people accepted, welcomed and utilized it too eagerly for that. But they could and did get rid of Sir Horace Plunkett himself. The one serious blot in the Act creating the Department of Agriculture was the clause providing that its Vice-President and working head should be a member of the Government and therefore a Member of Parliament. At the time the Department was launched Sir Horace

Plunkett was in Parliament. He lost his seat, however, at the election of 1900. The Unionist Government, nevertheless, requested him to remain in his post. The Council of Agriculture, composed, as I have said, of two-thirds elected members, virtually all of whom are Nationalists, seconded the request. Sir Horace Plunkett repeatedly offered to resign if they gave the word, but this representative body of Irish farmers, knowing his value and the value of his work, as repeatedly invited him to remain. When the Liberal Government came into power in 1906 Sir Horace Plunkett, though a political opponent, was asked to continue in office until a specially appointed Committee had inquired into the workings and constitution of the Department. The Nationalists, however, could contain themselves no longer. They closed round Mr. Birrell, demanding Sir Horace Plunkett's dismissal; and Mr. Birrell, notwithstanding that the Report of the Committee was in his hands and that it specifically recommended that the Vice-Presidency should be made a non-Parliamentary post, gave way. Sir Horace was turned out and Mr. T. W. Russell, once a Unionist politician and now almost, if not quite, a Home Ruler, a man of great fire and zeal but wholly unversed in practical agricultural problems, was installed in his place. I have narrated this unsavory incident at length in order that Americans may appreciate the sort of obstacles that a constructive reformer has to contend with in Ireland at the hands of the professed friends and representatives of the Irish people. The Nationalists have had their way and Mr. Russell is now administering the Department with the looked-for regard for political susceptibilities. None the less, though the danger of a lapse into the disastrous policy of spoon-feeding is not altogether passed, the Department remains the most original and beneficial institution in Ireland and, so long as it is developed along the lines laid down by its originators, cannot help contributing with increasing success to an all-round raising of the standards of economic thought, of industrial preparation, of agricultural practice and of rural living throughout Ireland.

But it is not in agriculture alone that one feels the stir and straining of an upward lift. All over Ireland sounds the hum of practical endeavor, with an undertone of almost feverish poignancy. There is something in it of the passion of a religious revival expressing itself in the dry terms of industrial economics. Nowhere

have I met so many men and women so consumed with the ambition to "do something" for their country. I dare not say that their activities are always working along the soundest lines or that many of them do not confuse benevolence with beneficence. But the spirit behind them is admirable, and now less than ever can Ireland afford to see it relaxed. There are many aspects from which, so far from having passed the crisis of her fate, Ireland may be said to be just entering it. The policy of land purchase has laid the foundations of a new social order of peasant proprietors, but the superstructure to be erected on those foundations depends on the efforts of the Irish people themselves and cannot be determined by any external agency whatsoever. And even when every instrument of agricultural co-operation, of technical instruction, of State assistance acting upon local enterprise, of migration and resettlement, has been pressed into service—even then only a beginning will have been made. Without more industries and manufactures, without the extension of handicrafts subsidiary to agriculture, without a levelling-up of the whole scale of rural life, Ireland can hardly win her way to the prosperity she deserves. The problem of Irish development has lost something of its old political bitterness, only to take on a yet more stringent economical acuteness. The appalling drain of emigration still goes on. The Lunacy Commissioners and the Health Statistics tell a tale of even more sinister omen. The 200,000 uneconomic holdings remain more or less as they were. The crushed industrial instinct has yet to be revived. Capital still seeks the savings-bank. Taxation, direct and indirect, still awaits readjustment. The high natural capacities of the people, their quick intelligence, their industry—or should I rather say their latent faculty for industry?—have still to be made effective. In spite of everything men feel that Ireland is in peril of sinking into a stupor worse than death. With the intentness of doctors round a bed of sickness, they are striving and wrestling for a desperate recovery.

I wish I could pass their heroic efforts under microscopic review. But here a broad and rapid glance must suffice. There has been of late years a testing of many of the shafts and cranks of the Dublin Castle machinery. The Irish railways and the administration of the poor-law, the workings of the Congested Districts Board—the Board that has practically built up from

nothing the fisheries on the western coast and is conducting on land, under inconceivable difficulties and on somewhat dubious principles, a vast experiment in the migration and transplantation of the peasants and in the conversion of small barren holdings into moderate-sized farms—the Department of Agriculture, and the practicability of reafforestation, have all alike been inquired into. But the official fermentation is as nothing to the unofficial. Go where you will, even into the heart of desolate Mayo, and you do not get beyond its scope. Every town and county seems to have its Industrial Development Association; every paper seems to be urging upon the public the duty of preferring Irish manufactures. Openings for new industries and the revival of old ones are zealously canvassed. The resources of the country are being brought one by one under fresh and open-minded examination. You find a priest here who has raised \$30,000 to start a woollen mill. You find a duchess there who has founded a co-operative creamery, and an earl's wife somewhere else who has revived in her neighborhood the homespun tweed industry. The vast extension of Irish lace-making owes more to Lady Aberdeen than to any one else. Mr. Birrell can hardly stir outside the Secretary's Lodge in Phoenix Park without somebody trying to pick his official pocket for a new railway or a pier or Government aid to this enterprise and to that. It all, I suppose, helps. Some of it perhaps would make one suspect that there is a danger of industrial development becoming a social fad. A good deal of it, too, is ill-regulated and has more relation to sentiment and philanthropy than to commercial principles. But it keeps the question alive, and it creates an atmosphere that favors the solid achievements of practical men. To get a few shop-windows dressed with Irish goods, to win an Irish trade-mark from officialdom, to expose foreign manufacturers who try to palm off their wares as Irish, and to pass resolutions denouncing public bodies for their remissness in not patronizing Irish furniture and Irish ink exclusively, does not sound like a very hopeful form of activity. But it has, no doubt, its use in propagating a sustained and pervasive interest in the country's material needs and difficulties; it turns thought in an economic direction; it fosters the new tendency towards the concrete and the practical.

SYDNEY BROOKS.

(To be continued.)